Would You Believe—An Expert on Russia?

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YOU ARRIVE at Sen. Allen Ellender's door, or most people do, knowing only that he is a little eccentric even by the standards of the United States Senate, that he is a Louisiana Democrat and something of a gourmet, and that he is a very big figure in agriculture matters as Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Would you believe that this bantam of a man, with the flamboyant gestures and insistent voice, is also a very serious, self-made authority on Soviet affairs? That he has been a regular visitor to the Soviet Union? And that in the process of this self-education, he has abandoned his old, familiar cold war reflexes and has become one of the Senate's most earnest exponents of Soviet-American *detente*?

It's true, all of it, and whether you agree with the Ellender view of the Soviet Union, you cannot be other than impressed by the effort he has put into his rather lonely and largely unnoticed exploration of a subject that seems, on its face, to have very little connection with parity or acreage allotments or all the other things that Agriculture Committee Chairmen are supposed to be thinking about.

FIVE TIMES since 1955 the 78-year-old Senator has visited the Soviet Union, most recently for 53 days last fall. Equipped with expertise in agriculture and, he says, objectivity, unencumbered by any escort save an American Embassy interpreter, he has found his Russian sojourns truly broadening and productive of insights unavailable to men who stay at home.

Ellender is disappointed that up to now his foreign-policy views—documented in reports to the Senate and in books—have not been taken seriously. He shrugs at the suggestion that his reports may be too long and unfocused, or too naive. He sees nothing funny in remarks that others have found funny ("the canals in Venice are filled with water"). "I can't command the attention of the press," he says. "I've been in public life 53 years but I'm kind of timid about getting up every day and saying the same thing, the way some do."

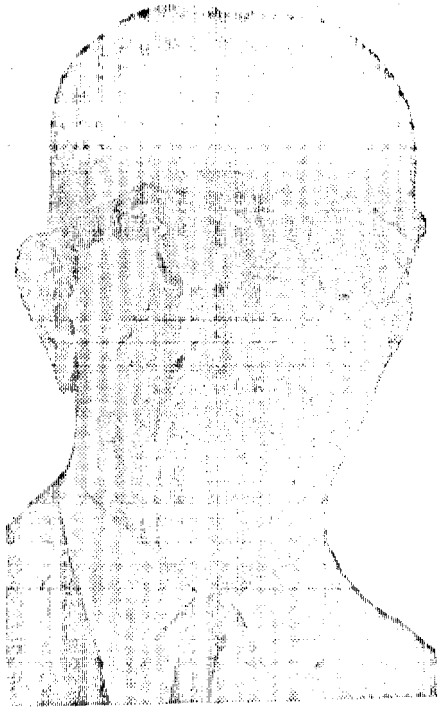
No matter. Ellender declares he'll go "all out" this year, from his position on the Appropriations subcommittee that handles defense (he's not on Foreign Relations or Armed Services) to "prevent us from spending one dime to further strengthen NATO." He counts on support from as many as two thirds of his fellow Senators in pursuit of that goal.

THROUGH RUSSIA'S Stalin years, says Ellender, he voted obediently for whatever funds the Pentagon sought, accepting its rationale that the funds were essential for defense. "I always thought Defense was honest and sincere and knew what it was talking about," he says. "I don't want to be misunderstood. Stalin did much to make our people fearful. We felt in danger."

But, he says, "I often wondered, why in hell don't we get together with the Russians. I found it strange there was so much trouble and friction in coming together." He dates the start of his awakening from his first trip to Russia, in 1955. "I went to Minsk, Orel, Odessa, Volgograd. The damage there from the Germans was (here Ellender thrashes his fists helplessly) useless, wanton. If only you were to *see* it. I don't blame the Russian people at all for fearing the Germans."

"So help me God, if I had understood at the time that the Administration had decided after the war to embrace Germany and Japan, then I would not have consented. With the knowledge I gained visiting Russia, I found those people are just like we are, especially in Siberia, where the people reminded me of our own pioneers in the West, identical. They told me how much they liked Americans. They asked, why do you surround us with a ring of steel, Japan, Okinawa, Philippines, North Africa, West Europe, air bases all around. My answer was: to defend. I didn't know any better. Congress blindly follows the military. That's why I voted as I did."

He used to believe—as he fears Defense Secretary Melvin Laird still does—that "the United States had to speak from strength, all that stuff. I didn't know any better. But we have spent *110 billion dollars* to isolate Russia and today Russia is stronger than ever, she's mighty. Anything that widens differences between us and the Russians, I'm against. That is why I have opposed the extension of NATO. I'm telling you right now, the biggest mistake we ever made was not to take de Gaulle's advice and move out of Europe. We say we want peace but we rearm. We ought to be honest. We have got to be, to dispel the fear of the Russian people"



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IF THERE WAS ONE moment of truth for Ellender, it came one time at Yalta when he emerged from a building into a waiting crowd of a thousand Russians. "They looked at my clothing, stroked my suit, they were amazed. They asked if anybody in America could buy such a suit. I said, of course, as long as you had the money. I saw the time was ripe for a realistic exchange program so that the Russian people could learn about us—to get them excited, make them envious"

"Look what happened after Krushchev came here (in 1959). He went back and started the incentive system. It was first applied to wearing apparel. The shelves were full of unsold stuff, nobody wanted it, but that's been changed. The leaders do it because the people demand it. Krushchev was the only leader who tried to respond to the will of the people. What he started is what's now giving the current leaders so much trouble."

Ellender doesn't dwell much on Czechoslovakia. He views the Czech striving for liberalization as an extension of similar and ongoing efforts in Russia. And he treats the Soviet invasion as a serious but not dis-

abling embarrassment to the cause of East-West detente.

He is really more concerned to get Americans to judge the Russians by no harsher terms than those they apply to themselves. For instance, of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, he says, "I'm surprised the Soviets didn't do it earlier. We'd surrounded *them* for 15 years. It looked as though the only place there are angels outside heaven is the U.S." In Russia's moves to put a fleet into the Mediterranean, Ellender sees merely an initiative balancing our own.

A MAN OF FINE RAGES, Ellender has got one for the State Department as well as the Pentagon, and this episode—related here only from his point of view—perhaps sums it up. One needs to know only that the Department generally feels fatigued by Ellender's requests for services on his travels.

Arriving in Moscow in 1955, Ellender found that none of his customary requests ("that thick") for appointments had been made. The then-Ambassador, Charles E. Bohlen, told him he was on "strict instructions not to help," the Senator recalls. So Ellender requested and received, by cable, State Department permission to make his own appointments. Old Moscow hand Bohlen warned him he was wasting his time.

At one point Ellender asked Bohlen if he could use the ambassador's phone to call the Foreign Ministry for appointments. Bohlen declined. Ellender went to a pay station and phoned himself. The answerer spoke only Russian but soon an English-speaking voice came on. Ellender asked for Politburo appointments and was informed that, of the top men, only Anastas Mikoyan was available. Fine, said Ellender. The voice told him to wait in the booth for a callback and, in less than half an hour of waiting, the voice did call back with a Mikoyan appointment the next day.

Ellender spent the intervening time visiting farms. The next day, with American diplomat John Guthrie in tow, he visited the Kremlin and passed on to Mikoyan the complaints he had heard on the farms. Mikoyan didn't know too much about farming, Ellender recalls. They talked for two hours and Mikoyan said he could see anything he wanted the next time he came.

In the car, Guthrie said he'd learned more in those two hours than in his whole tour to that point. Ellender said: "The trouble with you goddam diplomats is, you have a chip on your shoulder. You see something good in Russia and you pass it over, you see something bad and you criticize. My approach was objective and that's why Mikoyan helped me."

And at the Embassy, Ellender says, he told the Ambassador: "Mr. Bohlen, you've been here a long time and in your book the only good Russian is a dead Russian."

GUTHRIE'S AND BOHLEN'S reactions are not a part of Ellender's record. But his own judgments very much are. The Senator is quite aware that, as a peace advocate, he is casting himself in what is—for a senior Senator and member of the Senate "club"—a strange role. Already some demands for his recall have come from Louisiana. Ellender is undeterred. His current program is to publicize his new gospel as widely as he can, to work over the Defense Department budget from his Appropriations outpost, and to return to Russia after he is 80 years old.

"I talked to an engineer at a big aluminum plant outside Irkutsk," he says, positively vibrating with admiration for a technical achievement he discovered there, "and do you know . . . *That* opened my eyes."